

**Testimony Before the U.S. House Subcommittee on National Security, the Border,  
and Foreign Affairs (Committee on Oversight and Accountability)**

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**October 25, 2023**

Chairman Grothman, Ranking Member Garcia, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for convening a hearing on such an important and critical issue.

My name is Dr. Meaghan Mobbs. I sit before you as a woman, the mother of two young girls, and the representative of Independent Women's Forum, a nonprofit that works every day to engage and inform women about how policy issues impact them and their loved ones. We celebrate women's accomplishments and fight to expand women's options and opportunities.

I lead with this as it's imperative we explicitly define what a woman is.

A woman is an adult female human.

While we appear to struggle with that definition in the West, oppressive regimes, authoritarians, and fanatics all over the world do not have the same "confusion" as they use that biological fact as a means to identify, subjugate, and tyrannize women and girls.

Globally, religious women endure distinct forms of violence and persecution due to their sex and their capacity to bear future generations. The very ability to procreate, something only women are capable of, is used as a tool to oppress.

Women, simply because they are women, face rape, forced marriage, and sterilization. Women belonging to religious minorities are particularly vulnerable. Their persecution tends to be more violent, complex, and hidden—riddled with shame, these women and girls often bear in silence the horrors visited upon them.

These evils are perpetuated against them for the alleged crime of simply believing in something different than their tormentor and their gift of reproduction.

Hamas' attack on Israel and the targeted violence against young women is an all-too-recent example. The entire world bore witness to young women paraded

around half-naked, their pants soaked in blood from repeated rape. A morgue worker for the military reported: “There is evidence of mass rape so brutal that they broke their victims’ pelvis – women, grandmothers, children.”<sup>1</sup>

If we do not have the moral courage to define what a woman is, how will we have the fortitude to do what is necessary to protect them?

## **The World is an Increasingly Dangerous Place**

The last two years have revealed the perilous state of our safety and security. In less than twenty-four months, we have witnessed the biggest attack on a European country since WWII and the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust.

There is war in Europe, and war in the Middle East. Six central African nations experienced military coups since 2021—Gabon, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, and Sudan.<sup>2</sup> Latin America is facing surging gang violence and crime. Even in countries like Chile and Uruguay, traditionally viewed as havens of tranquility in the region, crime rates are astronomically high. In the year 2022 alone, Chile witnessed a 32% rise in murders, hitting a historic high,<sup>3</sup> alongside massive increases in rapes. Uruguay experienced a crime wave last year with a 25% uptick in murders.<sup>4</sup>

The entire world witnessed the ethnic cleansing of the Christian Armenia population of Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>5</sup> In the last 30 days, almost all of the estimated 120,000 ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh were violently forced from their homes. This forced migration followed a months-long siege and intentional starvation of the population.

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Fagge, “Israeli morgue worker says horrors inflicted on Hamas’ victims are worse than the Holocaust,” The Daily Mail (October 20, 2023), *available at* <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12653435/Israeli-morgue-worker-says-horrors-inflicted-Ha-mass-victims-worse-Holocaust-including-decapitated-pregnant-woman-beheaded-unborn-child.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Igor Ngima and Tiseke Kasam-bala, “A Surge of Military Coups in Africa Threatens Human Rights and the Rule of Law,” Freedom House (October 12, 2023), *available at* <https://freedomhouse.org/article/surge-military-coups-africa-threatens-human-rights-and-rule-law>.

<sup>3</sup> Nicolas Saldias, “As Concern Over Crime Rises, Chile’s Boric Shifts Right,” Americas Quarterly (April 24, 2023), *available at* <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/as-concern-over-crime-rises-chiles-boric-shifts-right/>.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Appleby, Chris Dalby, Sean Doherty, Scott Mistler-Ferguson, and Henry Shuldiner, “InSight Crime’s 2022 Homicide Round-Up,” InSight Crime (February 8, 2023), *available at* <https://insightcrime.org/news/insight-crime-2022-homicide-round-up/#Uruguay>.

<sup>5</sup> David J. Scheffer, “Ethnic Cleansing is Happening in Nagorno-Karabakh. How can the world respond?,” Council on Foreign Relations (October 4, 2023), *available at* <https://www.cfr.org/article/ethnic-cleansing-happening-nagorno-karabakh-how-can-world-respond#:~:text=The%20ethnic%20Armenian%20population%20of,ethnic%20cleansing%20at%20warp%20speed>.

This week non-emergency personnel were ordered to evacuate the U.S. Embassy in Iraq. This is the seventh evacuation of the Biden presidency following Afghanistan,<sup>6</sup> Ukraine,<sup>7</sup> Belarus,<sup>8</sup> Sudan,<sup>9</sup> Haiti,<sup>10</sup> and Niger.<sup>11</sup>

All the while our greatest adversary—China—grows stronger and bolder.

In short, we are in a new era of conflict and violence.

## Global Trends in Religious Persecution of Women and Girls

The tense global climate has concurrently borne a precipitous uptick in violations of religious freedom.

In 2023, countries where religious freedom was violated were home to over 4.9 billion people.<sup>12</sup> The persecution women face often manifests in forced marriages, which saw a 16% increase, and physical violence, which rose by 31% over the last year.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lara Jakes, “In a final blow of the 20-year war, U.S. envoys close their embassy and exit Kabul,” *New York Times* (August 30, 2021), *available at* <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/30/us/politics/blinken-us-evacuation-taliban-afghanistan.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Hansler and Kylie Atwood, “US closing embassy in Kyiv and moving remaining diplomats to western Ukraine amid fears of Russian invasion,” *CNN* (February 14, 2022), *available at* <https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/14/politics/us-embassy-kyiv-closure/index.html#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20is%20closing,State%20Antony%20Blinken%20announced%20Monday>.

<sup>8</sup> “U.S. Closes Belarus Embassy, Authorizes Voluntary Departures for Russian Embassy,” *RadioFree Europe RadioLiberty* (February 28, 2022), *available at* <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-closes-belarus-embassy-ukraine-invasion/31728309.html#:~:text=U.S.%20Closes%20Belarus%20Embassy%2C%20Authorizes%20Voluntary%20Departures%20For%20Russia%20Embassy.-The%20US%20Embassy&text=The%20State%20Department%20says%20it,to%20Russia%27s%20invasion%20of%20Ukraine>.

<sup>9</sup> Jim Garamone, “U.S. Forces Evacuate Americans From Khartoum Embassy,” *U.S. Department of Defense* (April 23, 2023), *available at* <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3371442/us-forces-evacuate-americans-from-khartoum-embassy/>.

<sup>10</sup> “U.S. closes Haiti embassy amid ‘rapid gunfire’ after Haitian march to demand security,” *CBS News* (August 8, 2023), *available at* <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/haiti-us-embassy-closed-violence-gunfire-gangs-haitians-march-demand-security/>.

<sup>11</sup> Nahal Toosi, Lara Seligman, and Alexander Ward, “U.S. orders pull-out of many U.S. embassy personnel in Niger,” *Politico* (August 2, 2023), *available at* <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/08/02/united-states-embassy-niger-coup-00109408>.

<sup>12</sup> “Religious Freedom Report,” *Aid to the Church in Need* (2023), *available at* <https://acninternational.org/religiousfreedomreport/reports/global/2023>.

<sup>13</sup> Emily Wood, “Trafficking, forced marriages of Christian woman on the rise worldwide, *Open Doors Reports*,” *The Christian Post* (March 10, 2021), *available at* <https://www.christianpost.com/news/trafficking-forced-marriages-of-christian-women-on-the-rise.html>.

More than 360 million Christians suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith.<sup>14</sup> Christian women and girls, in particular, face violent and degrading forms of persecution, with sexual violence reported in 90% of the top 50 countries listed on Open Doors' World Watch List, which ranks the countries where Christians face the most extreme persecution.<sup>15</sup>

Christians and Jews are not the only religious groups to bear the weight of oppression.

At this very moment, the Uyghurs, a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority group residing in China, have been subjected to severe human rights abuses by the Chinese government.

Described as a "quiet genocide," the treatment of Uyghurs includes arbitrary detentions, torture, slave labor, cultural vandalism, reeducation of children and adults, and forced sterilizations.<sup>16</sup> Regarding the latter, the Chinese government poured \$37 million into forced sterilizations and IUD implantations meant to rapidly decrease Uyghur birth rates, which dropped 24% in 2019 compared with 4.2% nationwide.<sup>17</sup>

Rayhan Asat, a Washington-based Uyghur lawyer who is campaigning for the release of her brother from detainment previously expressed: "I think, indeed, Uyghur women are the most vulnerable in this genocide. Their bodily autonomy has been violated through sexual, medical means and forced labor."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "World Watch List 2023," *OpenDoors*, available at <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/>.

<sup>15</sup> Nicola Martin, "The hidden persecution of Christian women and girls," *Evangelical Alliance* (May 31, 2022), available at <https://www.eauk.org/news-and-views/the-hidden-persecution-of-christian-women-and-girls>.

<sup>16</sup> "Uyghurs in China - An Oppressed Minority," *Deutsche Welle* (June 27, 2023), available at <https://www.dw.com/en/uyghurs-in-china-an-oppressed-minority/a-65096494#:~:text=China's%20Uyghur%20policy%20is%20a,Beijing>.

<sup>17</sup> Adrian Zenz, "Sterilizations, IUDs, and Mandatory Birth Control: The CCP's Campaign to Suppress Uyghur Birthrates in Xinjiang," *The Jamestown Foundation* (July 21, 2020), available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343971074\\_Sterilizations\\_IUDs\\_and\\_Mandatory\\_Birth\\_Control\\_The\\_CCP's\\_Campaign\\_to\\_Suppress\\_Uyghur\\_Birthrates\\_in\\_Xinjiang](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343971074_Sterilizations_IUDs_and_Mandatory_Birth_Control_The_CCP's_Campaign_to_Suppress_Uyghur_Birthrates_in_Xinjiang).

<sup>18</sup> Simina Mistreanu, "Uyghur Women are China's Victims - and Resistance," *Foreign Policy* (March 12, 2021), available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/12/uyghur-women-are-chinas-victims-and-resistance/>.

They have also been the most ferocious champions of Uyghur freedom. In 2019, it was a Uyghur woman who leaked the first explosive trove of secret files that documented the camps' existence.<sup>19</sup>

Likewise, it was another woman, Mahsa Amini, a Kurdish-Iranian whose death at the hands of the morality police sparked protests against the country's conservative Islamic theocracy. Authorities responded with a violent crackdown in which more than 500 people were killed and over 22,000 others were detained.<sup>20</sup>

There are myriad other horror stories to be told like the Yazidis who suffered at the hands of the Islamic State. They intentionally targeted women, raping and impregnating them in an attempt to corrupt the future makeup of Yazidi communities. ISIS' goal was to ensure that Yazidi children were no longer Yazidi, and subsequently be of a different faith. By the end of their reign of terror, thousands of women and girls were abducted and traded into sexual slavery. Boko Haram did the same with the most traumatic offense being the forced sexual enslavement of 276 schoolgirls.<sup>21</sup> Again, their crime was their faith and their sex.

## **Foreign Policy and Aid Must Not Fail Religious Freedom**

Tragically, recent foreign policy and aid decisions have placed the most vulnerable in worse conditions. Beginning with the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan, women and girls around the world increasingly suffer from persistent and devastating human rights violations.<sup>22</sup> There have been regressions in access to education, their ability to move freely, and restrictions on their ability to freely practice their chosen faith.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban is attempting to eradicate women and girls from public life, crushing them under their perverted belief system. While the U.S. government

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<sup>19</sup> Austin Ramzy and Chris Buckley, "'Absolutely No Mercy': Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims," *The New York Times* (November 16, 2019), *available at* <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html>.

<sup>20</sup> AP World News, "Mahsa Amini, the Kurdish-Iranian woman who died in police custody, is awarded EU human rights prize," *Associated Press* (October 19, 2023), *available at* <https://apnews.com/article/eu-sakharov-prize-masha-amini-5a24ba82e8b7819afae72e9dff4bc25e>.

<sup>21</sup> Samaila Ziradzo and Robert T. Netangaheni, "The traumatic consequences of Boko Haram slavery among the ethnic minorities of southern Borno, Borno state, and Nigeria," *African Journal Primary Health Care Family Medicine* (2022), *available at* <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9772719/>.

<sup>22</sup> UN Affairs, "Women and girls continue to be killed, based on gender alone," *UN News* (October 3, 2023), *available at* <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/10/1141842>.

continues to be the largest international donor to Afghanistan, it remains unclear the extent to which U.S. foreign assistance funds have been diverted to the Taliban in the form of taxes or fees.<sup>23</sup> The administration continues to struggle with ways to exert influence over the Taliban's top decision-makers and is finding little success. To date, there have been no advancements in religious freedom and the liberation of women and girls.

Similarly, the administration miscalculated and funded Iran. On Sept. 29, national security adviser Jake Sullivan remarked: "The Middle East region is quieter today than it has been in two decades."<sup>24</sup> His examples: a truce in Yemen's civil war, a relatively stable Iraq, and a suspension of Iranian attacks on U.S. forces in the Middle East. Even without the devastating recent attack by Iran-backed Hamas, his examples were folly.

Iran and its proxy forces have attacked U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria 83 times since President Biden took office.<sup>25</sup> In response, the U.S. military has launched only four retaliatory operations.

President Biden revoked the designation of Yemen's Houthis as a terrorist group. This did not alleviate either the war or the humanitarian crisis that has continued to unfold. Women and girls continue to be mutilated at the hands of men. One study found that in Yemeni coastal areas, the prevalence of female genital mutilation was 89% among women and 79.8% among the youngest daughters surveyed.<sup>26</sup> Last week, U.S. warships intercepted missiles fired from the Houthis directed towards Israel.

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<sup>23</sup> Clayton Thomas, "Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service (June 21, 2023), *available at* <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45122>.

<sup>24</sup> Antony J. Blinken and Dana Bash, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken with Dana Bash of CNN's State of the Union," US Department of State Transcript (October 8, 2023), *available at* <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-with-dana-bash-of-cnns-state-of-the-union-3/#:~:text=NATIONAL%20SECURITY%20ADVISOR%20SULLIVAN%3A%20The,tensions%20between%20Israelis%20and%20Palestinians>.

<sup>25</sup> Jeff Schogol, "Iran has attacked US troops 83 times since Biden became president," Task&Purpose (March 28, 2023), *available at* <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/iran-attacks-us-military-iraq-syria-biden/>.

<sup>26</sup> Mansour Abdu Al-Taj and Motahar Hassan Al-hadari, "Prevalance and drivers for female genital mutilation/cutting in three coastal governorates in Yemen," BMC Public Health volume 23 (July 18, 2023), *available at* <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/prevalance-and-drivers-female-genital-mutilationcutting-three-coastal-governorates-yemen>.

While certain aspects of Iraq have grown more stable, the last two years have seen a spate of highly-publicized killings of women. This has driven public debate about the urgent need for a domestic violence law. Since 2015, drafts of such legislation have been opposed in parliament on the grounds that it would violate Islam and would be “incompatible with Iraqi culture.”<sup>27</sup>

The U.S. continues to give out massive sums of aid to Yemen, Iraq, and many other countries that rank among the worst in their treatment of women and girls. Studies have shown that foreign aid promotes development in democracies but not in autocracies.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

International religious freedom, once a fundamental and bipartisan aspect of U.S. foreign policy, has been relegated to a second-tier right. The current administration has purposefully and intentionally adopted a more secular stance made clear by Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s assertion that no right holds precedence over others.<sup>29</sup>

The downgrading of religious freedom as a foundational principle is extremely concerning. This reorientation in U.S. foreign policy underscores a nuanced, yet consequential, shift in which certain rights are prioritized, or deprioritized, alongside the rise of religious discrimination, armed conflict, genocide, and atrocities. The intensified attention towards specific facets of certain rights—notably LGBTQI+ rights, climate action, and racial justice—specifically within the arena of foreign aid, increasingly alienates a broad spectrum of individuals and groups.

At the beginning of the administration, President Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken pledged to reinstate human rights and center gender discrimination in U.S. foreign policy. Yet, little has actually been done to effectively address the

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<sup>27</sup> Taif Alkhudary, “As Iraq Backslides on gender equality, where are its women MPs?” Al Jazeera (September 9, 2023), *available at* <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/9/9/as-iraq-backslides-on-gender-equality-where-are-its-women-mps>.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Yuichi Kono and Gabriella R. Montinola, “The Uses and Abuses of Foreign Aid: Development Aid and Military Spending,” *Political Research Quarterly* (2012), *available at* [https://www.jstor.org/stable/23563169?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/23563169?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents).

<sup>29</sup> Eileen Walsh, “Joe Biden Doesn’t Look like a Champion of Women’s Rights,” AEI (April 16, 2021), *available at* <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/joe-biden-doesnt-look-like-a-champion-of-womens-rights/>.

rampant regression of women's rights, including their religious freedom, as oppression spreads across the world.

The administration's piecemeal approach to rights has undermined their effectiveness and the U.S.'s influence.

In 2021, Turkey, the U.S. NATO ally, opted out of the Istanbul Convention, a pioneering treaty aimed at combating domestic violence against women, which had been ratified by 34 nations. This withdrawal ignited a wave of protests across Turkey, as women's groups voiced their outrage over the government's indifferent stance towards gender-based violence. Turkey's regression occurred even with a 1,400% rise in female homicides during the initial seven years of Islamist rule.<sup>30</sup>

Turkey's actions are emblematic of a larger pattern. In Egypt, a proposed law threatened to curtail a woman's autonomy in marriage, divorce, child guardianship, and international travel.<sup>31</sup> Nearby in Libya, similar restrictions have been legislated, including a law that strips women and girls of the right to travel abroad.

Make no mistake, if women and girls cannot travel freely they certainly do not have the right to practice their chosen religion.

The irony unfolds as the Biden administration, in an attempt to appeal to its progressive constituency by prioritizing gender rights, falls short of advocating for the universality of women's and girl's rights, thereby allowing nations like Turkey, Egypt, and Afghanistan to erode them without repercussions.

Despite the massive U.S. financial aid to all these nations, the reluctance to confront them, and others, on women's rights issues—including their religious freedom—reflects a disconnect between the administration's rhetoric and actions.

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<sup>30</sup>Alexander Christie-Miller, "Turkey grapples with spike in 'honor' killings," *The Christian Science Monitor* (April 14, 2011), *available at* <https://www.yahoo.com/news/turkey-grapples-spike-honor-killings-20110414-140553-545.html>.

<sup>31</sup>"Egypt: Sharp criticism over law change limiting women's rights," *Al Jazeera* (March 3, 2021), *available at* <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/3/egypt-proposed-personal-status-law-sparks-sharp-debate>.

America must return to the exportation of freedom, not ideological indoctrination. This can be accomplished by Congressional focus and commitment to fund bipartisan, traditional elements of democracy and human rights promotion.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Max Primorac and James Roberts, “Congress Must Stop Biden’s Misuse of U.S. Foreign Aid to Impose His Radical Social Agenda on the World,” Heritage Foundation (May 10, 2022), *available at* <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/congress-must-stop-bidens-misuse-us-foreign-aid-impose-his-radical-social>.